Hagar of the Pawnshop

BY FERGUS HUME

THE EIGHTH CUSTOMER AND THE PAIR OF BOOTS

He was a very little lad, reaching scarcely to the top of the counter; but he had a sharp, keen face, intelligent beyond his years, with the precocity taught by poverty. Hagar, looking at his shock of red hair and the shrewd blue eyes which peered up at her face, guessed that he was Irish; and when he spoke his brogue proved her guess to be a correct one. She stared at the ragged, bare footed urchin with some amusement, for this was the smallest customer she had yet had. But Micky—so he gave his name—was quite as sharp as customers of more mature years—in fact, sharper. He bargained astutely with Hagar, and evidently had made up his small mind not to leave the shop until he obtained his own price for the article he was pawning. This was a pair of strong laborer's boots, hob-nailed and stout in the soles. The red headed boy heaved them on to the counter with a mighty clatter and demanded 7 shillings therefor.

"I'll give you 5," said Hagar, after examination.

"Ah, now, would ye?" piped the brat, with shrill impudence. "Is it taking the bread out av me mouth ye w'uld be afther? Sure, me mother sid sivin bob, an' 'tis sivin I want."

"Where is your mother? Why did she not come herself?"

"Mother's comforting herself wid the drink round the carner; and sure I'm aqual to gittin' th' dirthy money mesilf! Sivin bob alannah, an' may the hivins be yer bed!"

"Where did you get these boots?" said Hagar, asking another question, and ignoring the persuasive tone of the lad. "I see there are letters marked in nails on the two soles."

"Ah! there moight be," assented Micky, complacently; "there's a 'G' on one foot, an a 'K' on the other; but me fawther's name is Patrick Dooley, an' he's in Amerikey, worse luck. Mother got thim boots folve days gone in the counthry. They wos a prisint, me darlin'; an' as they wos too big fur me an' me mother, we pop them, dear, fur sivin bob!"

"Take six," said Hagar, persuasively; "they aren't worth more."

"Howly saints! listen to the lies av her!" shrieked Micky. "Six, is it? An' how can I go to me mother wid a shillin' wrong? Sure, it's breakin' me hid she's be afther, wid o quart pot! An' what's money to the likes av you, me dear?"

"Here—here! Take the seven shillings!" said Hagar, anxious to rid herself of this shrieking imp. "I'll make out the ticket in the name of Mrs. Dooley——"

"Mrs. Bridget Dooley av Park lane," said Micky, grandly. "Sure that will do as well as any other place. It's on the tramp we are—bad luck to it! If 'twasn't for thim boots we got in Marlow, it's without a copper we'd be."

"Here! take the ticket and money. I daresay you stole the boots."

"Is it takin' away me character y'd afther? Stalin'? Wasn't thim boots a prisint to me, for pure charity an' love av the saints? Ah, well, I'm goin'—I'm goin'! Sivin bob; it's little enough onyhow; but phwat's the use of pookin' for justice to Oireland in the counthry av the Saxon toyrant?" and Micky went out singing "The Wearing of the Green" in a very shrill and unpleasant voice.

Hagar put the boots away, never expecting that a story could be attached to so ordinary a pawned article. But two days afterward she was reading an account of a murder, and, to her surprice, the very boots, now reposing on a high shelf in her shop, were mentioned as a link in the chain of evidence likely to hang the assassin. Coincidences occur in real life oftener than the world cares to admit; and this was a case in point. A pair of boots with initials on the soles had been pawned in her shop; and now—scarcely forty-eight hours afterward—she was reading about them in a newspaper. It was strange—almost incredible; but to quote a trite and well worn saying, "Truth is stranger than fiction." Briefly, the history of the crime was as follows:

Sir Leslie Crane of Welby Park, Marlow, had been shot by his gamekeeper, George Kerris. It seemed that the man was engaged to marry a farmer's daughter, Laura Brenton by name; and Sir Leslie had been paying the girl more attention than was consistent with their respective positions. Kerris had remonstrated with the Baronet, who had forthwith discharged him. A week later Crane, having gone out after dinner for a stroll in the park had been found dead by a pond known as the Queen's pond, which was some little distance from the gates. Footmarks had been discovered in the soft mud near the water, which showed that the assassin wore boots marked on the soles with the letters "G" and "K." These had been traced, through a Marlow bootmaker, to George Kerris. The man had been arrested, but neither denied his guilt nor affirmed his innocence. Still, as the report said, there could be no doubt that he had killed Sir Leslie in a fit of jealous rage, and also because he had been discharged. The boots could not be found, so undoubtedly the man had got rid of them after wearing them on the night of the murder. The report in the paper concluded by stating that the dead Baronet was succeeded by his cousin, now Sir Lewis Crane.

"Strange that the boots should have been pawned in London," thought Hagar, when she finished reading this article, "and stranger still that they should have been pawned by that Irish lad! On the day he came here he said the boots had been given to him five days previously. It was two days since then, so that in all makes seven days. H'm! Today is the 21st of August, so I suppose Kerris must have given the boots to Micky on the 14th. Let me see the date of the crime."

On examination she found that the murder had been committed on the night of the 12th of August, and that Kerris had been arrested on the 13th. Here Hagar came to a full stop and reflected. If Kerris had been in jail on the 14th—as from the report in the paper he undoubtedly was—he could not have given the boots to Mickey on that day. Yet the Irish lad had confessed to receiving the boots at Marlow, and had given a time which, as reckoned out by Hagar, corresponded with the 14th of the month. But on that day the man who owned the boots was under lock and key.

"There's something wrong here," said Hagar to herself, on making this discovery. Perhaps Kerris is innocent in spite of the evidence of the boots. What am I to do?"

It was difficult to say. Certainly the accused man did not assert his innocence—a fact which was rather astonishing on the face of it. No one would let himself be hanged for murder which they did not commit. Yet, if Kerris were guilty, he must have had an accomplice, else how could the boots have been given to the Irish tramp when their owner was in prison? The man, thought Hagar, might be innocent, after all, in spite of his strange silence. Still, not knowing all the circumstances of the case—save the garbled and bare report in the newspaper—the girl did not, and could not, make up her mind in the matter. At the present moment, her sole course was to write and state that the boots had been pawned. This Hagar did at once, and the next day received a visit from the detective who had charge of the case.

He was called Julf, a lean, tall, dark, and solemn creature, who went very cautiously to work—especially in cases of murder. He had a conscience, he said, and would never forgive himself did he hang the wrong criminal. Julf knew how often circumstantial evidence helped to condemn the innocent; how likely even the most acute detective was to be deceived by outward appearances and how intricate and dark were the paths which led to the discoveries of mysterious crimes. Hence he was slow and circumspect in his dealings.

On arriving at the Lambeth pawnshop he examined the boots, asked Hagar a few questions, and then sat down with her to thrash out the matter. Julf saw that the girl was shrewd and clever from the remarks she had made anent the pawning of the boots, so he was quite willing to discuss the affair freely with her. In contrast to many self-sufficient detectives, Julf always believed two heads were better than one, especially when the second head was that of a woman. He had a great respect for the instinct of the weaker sex.

"I'm afraid the man's guilty, right enough," he said, in his solemn way. "He had quarreled with Sir Leslie over this girl, and had been dismissed for insolence. Besides, he was seen coming out of the park at 10 o'clock—just after the murder!"

"Had he his gun with him?"

"No; but that's no matter. Sir Leslie was shot through the heart with a pistol. Now, Kerris had a pistol, but that can't be found either. You didn't have a pistol pawned here, did you?"

"Nothing was pawned but the boots," said Hagar, "and Kerris could not have given them to Micky; it seems that he was in prison on the day the lad got them."

"That is true enough. We must find this boy, and learn who gave him the boots on that day. But if Kerris is innocent, why doesn't he say so?"

"It is a mystery," sighed Hagar. "You say that Kerris' pistol cannot be found?"

"No; not in his house; so I daresay he flung it away after killing Sir Leslie."

"Oh, ho!" said Hagar, shrewdly, "then the weapon with which the murder was committed can't be found either."

"But the pistol is the same; Kerris used it, and then got rid of it."

"Why don't you search for it?"

"We have searched everywhere, but it cannot be found."

"Have you drained the pond near which the crime was committed?"

"Why, no," said Julf, meditatively; "we haven't done that. It's a good idea!"

Hagar sighed impatiently. "I wish I had this case in my own hands!" she said sharply; "I believe I'd find the assassin."

"We have found him, replied the detective stolidly. "Kerris killed Sir Leslie."

"I don't believe it!"

"Then why doesn't he deny it?"

"I can't say. Is Kerris much in love with this Laura Brenton?" asked Hagar, turning her large, bright eyes on Julf.

"I should think so! He's madly in love with her."

"And she with him?"

"Oh, I don't say that," replied Julf; "that is quite another thing. I fancy from what I have heard that she gave far too much encouragement to that young baronet. Kerris evidently had cause for jealousy; so I do not wonder he killed Sir Leslie."

"You have yet to prove that he did."

"Bah!" said Julf, rising to take his leave. "He quarreled with the baronet; he was discharged. His own pistol is missing, and the dead man was shot with a pistol. Then, there is the evidence of the boots with his initials on the soles. You can't get over that. Don't you talk nonsense, my girl, there is a strong case against Kerris."

"I can see that; but there is one point in his favor. He did not give those boots to Micky."

"Evidently not. But to prove that point we must find the lad."

This was easier said than done, for Micky and his mother had disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed them up. All the police and detective forces in London tried to find the boy, but could not. Yet on his evidence turned the whole case. And all this time George Kerris, in the Marlow prison, refused to open his mouth. Most people believed him to be guilty on the evidence of the boots; but Hagar, on the evidence of the pawning, insisted that he was innocent. Still, she could not understand why he held his tongue at such a crisis.

It has been stated several times that Hagar found her life in the pawnshop extremely dull, and seized every opportunity to gain for herself a little diversion. A chance of amusement in unraveling the mystery of the boots offered itself now, and this she resolved to take. Also the conduct of the case would necessitate a visit into the country; and, weary of the narrow streets of Lambeth, Hagar eagerly desired a breath of fresh air. She left the shop in charge of an elderly man, who had been her assistant since Bolker's departure, and took the train to Marlow. When she arrived there, Julf, more solemn than ever, met her at the railway station.

"Good day," said he quietly. "You see, I have agreed to let you assist me in finding out the truth of this case, though to my mind the truth is already plain enough."

"I don't believe it, Mr. Julf. Take my word for it, George Kerris is innocent of the crime."

"Is he?" said Julf in skeptical tones; "then who is guilty?"

"That is what I have come to find out," retorted Hagar. "I am obliged to you for letting me help you, though, to be sure, I do so only to gratify my own curiosity. But you won't repent of your concession. I am to have a free hand?"

"You can do exactly as you like."

"Can I? Then I shall first call and see the new baronet."

Refusing the offer of Julf to accompany her, on the plea that she could execute her business better alone, Hagar walked to Welby park, which was on the other side of Marlow, and asked to see Sir Lewis Crane. At first, owing to her gypsy like appearance, she was refused admittance, but on mentioning that her business had to do with the murder of the late baronet, Sir Lewis consented to see her. When face to face with him, Hagar, for reasons of her own, examined him closely.

He was an ugly, elderly little creature, many years older than his dead cousin, and had a mean yellow face, stamped with an expression of avarice. Hagar had seen just such another pinched, cunning look on the face of Jacob Dix, and she knew without much trouble that the man before her was a miser. However, she wasted no time in analyzing his character—knowing that it would reveal itself in the forthcoming conversation—but at once mentioned her business.

"I am come on the part of Mr. Julf to see about this murder," she said, curtly.

Sir Lewis raised his eyes. "I did not know that the government employed lady detectives!" was his remark.

"I am not a detective, but the owner of the shop in which the boots of George Kerris were pawned."

"The boots which prove his guilt," said Crane, with an air of relief, which did not escape Hagar.

"I rather think that they prove his innocence," was her cold reply.

"Oh! you are talking about them having been given to that tramp when Kerris was in prison. I know all about that, as the detective told it to me. But, all the same, Kerris is guilty, else he would deny his guilt."

"Have you any idea why he does not do so?"

Crane shrugged his shoulders. "No; unless it is that he knows himself to be guilty."

"I believe him to be innocent."

"Pshaw! My cousin admired Laura Brenton, who was engaged to Kerris, and was foolishly attentive to her. On that score the man was insolent; so Leslie discharged him. In committing the murder he took a double revenge."

"Where were you, Sir Lewis, when your cousin was killed?"

"In the park," replied the baronet, frankly. "After dinner my cousin and I went out for a stroll. In a short time he made some excuse to leave me, as I believe he wished to meet Laura by the Queen's pool. I walked in the opposite direction, and shortly afterward I came back to the house. Leslie had not returned, so I went to look for him and found his dead body by the pool."

"Did you hear the pistol shot?"

"Yes, but I paid no attention to it. My cousin was in the habit of firing at a target, and I thought he might be doing so then."

"What! Firing at a target in the twilight? Could your cousin see in the dark, like a cat?" said Hagar, with irony.

"I don't know anything about that!" retorted Crane, snappishly. "I have told you the story, as you represent the detective Julf. I say no more!"

"I don't want you to say more. May I go and look at the pond?"

"Certainly. One of the servants shall show it to you."

"Can't you come yourself?" said Hagar, with a keen glance.

Crane drew back and his yellow face grew pale. "No," said he, in an almost inaudible voice. "I have seen enough of that horrible place!"

"Very good; I'll go with the servant," replied Hagar, and marched toward the door.

"What do you want to see the pool for?" he asked, following.

"I wish to find the lost pistol."

When Hagar had taken her departure Sir Lewis, pale and nervous, stood near the open window. "Confound this woman!" he thought, clenching his hand. "She is far too clever, but I don't think she'll be quite clever enough to find that pistol," he added, in a satisfied tone.

The Queen's pool was a circular sheet of water filled with lilies, at the lower end of the park. On the way thereto Hagar asked the servant who was guiding her a few questions.

"Was Sir Lewis poor before he got the estate?" she demanded.

"Very poor, miss; hadn't a sixpence, but what he got from Sir Leslie."

"Was he on good terms with his cousin?"

"No, miss; they was quarreling fearful. On the night of the murder they had a row royal."

"What about?" asked Hagar, turning a keen look on the man.

"About money and that gal Laura. Sir Lewis loved her just as much as Sir Leslie, but she didn't care a straw for either of them, being taken up with Kerris."

"How does she take her lover's arrest?"

"Why, miss, she cries and cries, and swears that he is innocent and talks nonsense!"

"What kind of nonsense? There may be some sense in it?"

"I dursn't tell you, miss," said the servant, casting a hurried look around; "it 'ud be as much as my place is worth."

"Oh, I understand," said Hagar, serenely; "this Laura says that Sir Lewis killed his cousin."

"Yes, she do," replied the man, aghast at her penetration; "but how could you guess, miss, is more——"

"Never mind," said Hagar, cutting him short as they arrived at the pool. "Is this the place where the murder was committed?"

"Yes, miss; we found the body there in the mud, and just beside it the marks of the boots."

Hagar reflected, and asked another question. "Did Sir Lewis ever visit Kerris?"

"He did, miss, just two days afore the murder—went to see him about some game."

"Oh, did he?" murmured Hagar to herself. "I think there was something more than game in that visit."

Of this she said nothing to the man, who stood on the bank, watching her searching about the place. The pool was filled with clear water, and on it the lilies floated placidly. Hagar peered in to see if there was any trace of the pistol used to kill Sir Leslie; but, although the water was crystal clear, and she searched carefully, not a sign of a weapon could she see. The grass round the pool was closely shorn, and some little distance up the slope stretched a terrace with a flight of shallow stone steps. On either side of these, at the lower end, were two pillars, bearing urns of marble sculptured in classic fashion with nymphs and dancing fauns. In these bloomed scarlet genaniums, now in full flower and as Hagar idly gazing around, caught sight of the vivid blossoms an idea entered her head. Dismissing the man, for whom she had no further use, she moved swiftly toward the terrace and lifted one of the pots out of its marble urn.

"No sign of a pistol there," she said, replacing the pot with a sense of disappointment. "I may be wrong. Let me examine the other."

This time she was rewarded for her shrewd guess. At the bottom of the right hand urn, quite concealed by the pot, she found a small pistol. On its stock there was a silver plate, and on that plate a name was engraved. At the sight of this latter the eyes of Hagar glistened with much satisfaction.

"I thought so!" she said to herself; "and now to tell Julf!"

The detective was waiting for her at the park gates, and looked up expectantly as she moved toward him with a smile on her face. With grim satisfaction she placed the pistol in his hand.

"There is the weapon with which Sir Leslie was killed!" she said in a tone of triumph. "I found it under the geranium pot in one of those urns. What do you think of that?"

"The pistol of Kerris!" said Julf, quite amazed.

"No; not the pistol of Kerris, but of the man who murdered Sir Leslie."

"Kerris," repeated Julf with dogged obstinacy.

"Look at the name on the silver plate, you idiot!"

"Lewis Crane!" read the detective, stupefied. Then he looked up with an expression of blank astonishment on his solemn face. "What," he muttered; "do you think Sir Lewis killed his cousin?"

"I am sure of it!" replied Hagar firmly. "I have just learned from a servant that he was in love with the girl Laura also, and that he was poor and dependent upon the dead man for money. The two had a quarrel on the night of the murder, as they were walking in the park. Because of this quarrel they parted, each going different ways. Sir Lewis said that he returned home, that he heard the pistol shot, and thought that his cousin was shooting at a target—as if a man would do so in the twilight!" added the girl, contemptuously. "What he really did—Lewis, I mean—was to follow his cousin, and shoot him by the Queen's pool; then he hid the pistol in the marble urn and crept back to the house to play his comedy. I tell you, Mr. Julf, that Kerris is innocent. I said so always. Sir Lewis is the guilty person, and he slew his cousin out of jealousy of Laura Brenton, and because he wanted the dead man's money."

"But the boots—the footmarks in the mud?" stammered Julf, quite confounded by this reasoning. "The marks were made by the boots of Kerris."

"I quite believe that," admitted Hagar; "another portion of Sir Lewis' very clever scheme to ward off suspicion from himself. The servant who led me to the Queen's pool will tell you, as he told me, that Sir Lewis just a day or two before the murder, paid a visit to the cottage of Kerris. Now, it is my opinion that while there he stole the boots, and wore them on the night on which he committed the murder, with the intention of throwing the blame on Kerris, whom Laura Brenton loved. Don't you see what his game was, Mr. Julf? He wanted to gain a title and money, so as to marry Laura; so he slew his cousin to get the first, and laid the blame—by circumstantial evidence—on George Kerris, to get the second. Now what do you say?"

"It looks black against Sir Lewis, certainly," admitted Julf; "still, I cannot think that he would dare——"

"Bah! men dare anything to gratify their passions!" retorted Hagar shrewdly; "besides, he thought that he made all safe for himself by wearing the boots of Kerris. It was Sir Lewis who gave the boots to Micky. Oh, if that boy could only be found!"

"He is found!" said Julf, quickly. "I got a telegram while you were in the park. The police picked him up in Whitechapel, and will send him down here tomorrow. If he can swear that Sir Lewis gave him the boots I shall get a warrant out for that man's arrest."

"I believe he is guilty," said Hagar, in a meditative fashion, "and yet I am not altogether sure.'

"Why not? There is certainly a strong case against him."

"Yes, yes; but why, if Sir Lewis is guilty, should Kerris keep silent, and not declare his innocence? I must see the man and find out. Can I get into the jail?"

"I'll take you there myself tomorrow morning," replied Julf. "I should like to know the reason of his silence also. It can't be love of Sir Lewis as makes him hold his tongue."

"No; that is what puzzles me. After all, like Kerris, the baronet may be innocent."

Julf shook his head. "I can't think where you will find a third party on which to lay the guilt—unless," he added, with an afterthought, "you blame the Irish boy who pawned the boots."

"It may be even him!" said Hagar, seriously. "But we'll know tomorrow, I fancy. Kerris, Sir Lewis, Micky—him! I wonder which of the three killed that poor young man."

Hagar thought over this problem for an hour or so, then, not being able to solve it, she put it out of her head for the night. As for Julf, he was so much impressed by Hagar's cleverness in finding the pistol and constructing a case against Sir Lewis—who he now began to believe was guilty—that the next morning, before taking her to see George Kerris in prison, he conducted her to an outlying farm.

"Laura Brenton lives here," he said, "ask her about Sir Lewis and see if we can strengthen the case against him."

Laura was a fine, tall, handsome girl, somewhat masculine in her looks; but at the present moment she seemed ill and appeared haggard—which was no wonder, seeing that one of her lovers was dead and the other in prison. However, she was quite willing to answer Hagar's questions, and declared most emphatically that Kerris was innocent.

"He wouldn't kill a fly!" said she, weeping, "although he was angry with me for meeting Sir Leslie; but I never saw any harm in doing so."

"Opinions differ," said Hagar, coldly, not approving of this morality. "You met Sir Leslie on the night of the murder?"

"I—I didn't!" stammered the girl, fiercely. "Who says so?"

"Sir Lewis. He told me that his cousin left him in the park—after their quarrel—to see you by the Queen's pool."

This Laura denied flatly. "I went into Marlow on that evening to buy some ribbon," she explained, "but I never went near Welby park. Sir Lewis is a liar and a murderer!"

"A murderer? Why should he murder his cousin?" asked Hagar, sharply.

"Because he loved me, and I would have nothing to say to him."

"You loved Sir Leslie?"

"I did not!" blazed out the girl, wrathfully. "I loved neither of them, but only George Kerris. He is innocent and Sir Lewis is guilty. I believe he killed his cousin with the pistol Sir Leslie gave him."

"What do you know about that pistol."

"Why, explained Laura quietly, "I went to Welby park with father to pay the rent and in the library, on the table, there was a pistol with a silver plate on it. Sir Lewis—he was not the baronet then—told me that Sir Leslie had given it to him, and showed me his own name on the plate. As Sir Leslie was shot with a pistol, I believe Sir Lewis did it."

"But had not George Kerris a pistol also?"

"Yes; an old thing that wouldn't fire straight. I tried it myself at a target which George set up on the farm."

"The pistol isn't in George's house."

"I don't know where it is, then," said the girl, indifferently; "but I am sure of one thing, that George is innocent. Oh, try and get him out of jail!"

"And Sir Lewis hanged?" said Hagar dryly.

"Yes!" cried Laura fiercely; "he's a murdering beast; I should like to see him dead!"

Rather wondering at the fierceness of the girl, Hagar left her and went on to the jail in which Kerris was incarcerated. The game-keeper was a huge blond man, with a fresh, handsome face. Usually his expression was frank and kindly, but now, owing to recent events, he looked sullen. In spite of all Hagar's questioning, he persisted in declining an explanation.

"I'll say neither one thing nor another," he declared; "if I did kill Sir Leslie, or I didn't, is my business. Anyhow, he deserved to be killed."

"Who are you screening?" asked Hagar, changing her tactics.

"No one," replied Kerris, a color rising on his face.

"Yes you are, else you would not jeopardize your neck. But you shall be saved in spite of yourself. I know who killed Sir Leslie."

"You do?" asked the man, looking up anxiously.

"Yes, his cousin, Sir Lewis. We have found his pistol concealed where the murder took place; he stole your boots to wear them and throw the blame on you. You came out of Welby park at 10 o'clock, after the murder was committed. Did you not see Sir Lewis?"

"No, I didn't," replied Kerris, hastily. "I saw no one. I heard a shot and thought poachers might be about, but as Sir Leslie had discharged me I didn't think it was my business to see after them."

"Sir Lewis paid you a visit shortly before the murder?"

"Yes, he did; to see me about some game."

"Did you miss the boots after he left?"

"I never missed them till the night of the murder, when I wanted to put 'em on," said Kerris. "I hadn't worn them for some days, as they were new boots and rather hurt my feet."

"Then no doubt Sir Lewis stole them for his own purposes," said Hagar triumphantly. "He is guilty, and you——"

"I am innocent!" cried Kerris, proudly. "I don't mind saying it now. I never killed Sir Leslie; I never laid a finger on him."

"And you did not say so before because you are screening some one. Who is it?"

Kerris made no reply but looked uneasy.

Before Hagar could repeat her question, the answer thereto came from a most unexpected quarter. The door of the cell was opened and Julf entered, with an expression of profound astonishment on his face.

"Here's a go!" he cried to Hagar. "Micky has arrived, and has told me from whom he received the boots!"

"Sir Lewis?"

"No! I have seen Sir Lewis and he denies his guilt; also, he tells me a story which corroborates Micky's evidence, and explains why Kerris here holds his tongue."

Kerris rose from his seat on the bed with a bound and strode toward Julf, looking worried and fierce.

"Not a word; not a word!" he said, between his clenched teeth. "Spare her."

"Her!" cried Hagar, a light breaking in on her. "Laura Brenton?"

"Yes, Laura Brenton," replied Julf, shaking off the gamekeeper. "Micky has seen her; it was she who gave him the boots."

"I told her to! I told her to!" interrupted Kerris in despair.

"Nonsense! You wish to screen her, as you have tried to do all along. But you are wrong. Laura Brenton is not worth your sacrificing your life, my man. She is the guilty person who killed Sir Leslie. And why? Because he had cast her off and was about to marry another woman."

Kerris gave a great cry. "It is false—false! She loved me!"

"She loved herself," retorted Julf, sharply. "Sir Leslie promised to marry her, and because she could not force him to keep that promise she killed him. It was to throw the blame on you that she stole the boots and wore them on the night she met Sir Leslie by the Queen's pool. It was to get Sir Lewis into trouble that she stole his pistol to kill his cousin."

"And did she hide it in the urn?" asked Hagar, astonished by these revelations.

"No; Sir Lewis did so. He knew that Laura committed the crime."

"How so?"

"He heard the shot and went to see who had fired it. By the Queen's pool he found his cousin's dead body and picked up his own pistol on the bank. As Laura, to his knowledge, had taken it away from the library on the day she came with her father to pay rent, he knew that she had killed Sir Leslie To screen her, and not thinking of his own danger should the pistol with his name on it be found, he hid it in the urn where you found it. So, you see, two men have tried to screen this woman who loved neither of them."

"She loved me—me!" cried Kerris, in agony. "Oh, why did Sir Lewis speak?"

"To save himself from arrest," replied Julf. "He was not so loyal as you, my poor fellow. However, you will soon be released. Today I arrest Laura."

And this was done on that very morning. Laura was arrested, and, terrified by the statements of Micky and Sir Lewis, although George Kerris loyally kept silent, she confessed all. Julf's explanation was correct. She had met Sir Leslie on the night of the murder by the Queen's pool, with the intention of killing him should he persist in his intention of casting her off. He did so, and she killed him. She had stolen the pistol and the boots to throw the blame, should occasion arose, on Sir Lewis and Kerris. Also, she had taken away the pistol of Kerris from his cottage to inculpate him. But for Hagar and the episode of the pawned boots, which Laura had given to Micky to get rid of, she might have succeeded in her vile plans, and have escaped free, to ruin other men. As it was, she confessed her crime, and was condemned to penal servitude for life. She deserved the scaffold, but she escaped that through the leniency of the jury, on the score of her youth and beauty.

Released from the prison into which he had cast himself so madly to save an ungrateful woman, George Kerris came up to Lambeth and redeemed those fatal boots which had been pawned by Micky.

"I am going to Australia," he said to Hagar. "I failed to save her, so I cannot bear to remain at Marlow. I knew she was guilty all along, for she had been in my cottage the day previous to the murder, and had carried off these boots on the plea that her father wished for a similar pair and wanted to see them. When the footmarks with my initials were traced in the mud of the pond, I guessed that she had worn the boots, and had killed Sir Leslie. I loved her so dearly that I would have suffered in her place; but you with your clear head found her out, and now she is paying for her wickedness. Life is over for me here; I go to Australia, and I shall take these boots which ruined her with me."

"Why did you do all this for Laura—that worthless woman?"

"Worthless she is, I know," rejoined Kerris; "but—I loved her!" and with a nod he departed, carrying the boots and himself into exile.

Next Week—The Ninth Customer and the Casket.